

Duxbury Tercentenary Committee
Duxbury, Massachusetts
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Duxbury Ship-Building, a Vanished Industry

There will be much salty talk of the old clipper-ship days during the three-day celebration of the Duxbury Tercentenary, which is to be held July third, fourth and fifth. As a matter of fact, the motif of Duxbury's three hundredth birthday jubilee is to be found in the Tercentenary seal, which is a reproduction of the "Hope", a celebrated ship commanded by Captain John Bradford, of Duxbury.

The Tercentenary Committee has among its cherished possessions a manuscript from the pen of Captain Bradford, prepared by him in 1891, in which he reminisces about the old days of Duxbury ship building, referring to that once famous business as "A Vanished Industry." The following summary of his reminiscences presents the high-lights of a period of New England history that has now passed beyond recall:

About 1720, it is generally supposed, the first shipyard was started in Duxbury by Thomas Prince, whose earliest vessel was a sloop built chiefly of wild cherry. During all of its most prosperous times the timber used was found in Duxbury, white oak being employed for the knees and other parts of the vessel requiring great strength. We are told that vessels were then made almost entirely of pitch pine, the only superior wood being the best oak, which was used in making the floors, decks and beams. The pitch pine in those days must have been superior to that found now, because of its being the primitive growth.

Israel Sylvester, Benjamin Freeman and Perez Drew were among the early owners of shipyards. As the industry progressed, the ship Mattakeesett was built in 1833, and was the largest merchant vessel New England had yet produced. Ezra Weston's year was an exceedingly prosperous one, and associated with this business was a rope-walk where school boys ere constantly being called in to "turn the wheel." Longfellow, whose ancestors came from Duxbury (his mother was a Wadsworth) is said to have had this particular place in mind in his poem, "The Rope Walk."

Ezra Weston, the second of the name, and inheriting from his father the popular title of "King Caesar," was for the years 1820 to 1842 probably the most widely known ship owner in the United States. His ships were seen in all parts of the world. He not only built his own vessels, but he controlled nearly all the branches of business connected with shipbuilding and the operation of vessels. He had his own ropewalk, spar yard, blacksmith shop and sail-loft. He brought his timber and lumber from Haverhill and Bangor in his own schooner, or from Bridgewater and Middleboro with his own ox or horse teams, and his supplies from Boston in his own packet. His salt came from Cadiz, St. Ubes and Turks Island in his own brigs.

In those days there was no water or steam power used in laying up rigging, but all was done by horse-power at one end and man-power at the other. The spinning of the threads was done by hand. The men, usually six at a time, each with a bunch of hemp fastened about his waist, all moved with slow step backward. It required a good deal of practice for a man to spin an even thread, with no weak spots or bunches in it. It was monotonous work, the spinning, and the boy turning the wheel that twisted the threads has a dull time of it. After the men had passed out of hearing he heard nothing but the rattle of his wheel for twenty minutes.

The first Weston house burned and in 1808 or 1809, a more modern mansion was built. There is said to have been a secret passage beneath it, when the second King Caesar lived there, and while his vessels laden with rich cargoes from India anchored outside in the harbor, this tunnel was used to bring goods to the Weston mansion, thereby saving duty. In 1808 the fine old Weston mansion was built. This house is one of the best examples of architecture of its kind in all New England. As the Westons were rich people it was handsomely furnished and the wall paper imported and is still in good condition although it was put on over a hundred and twenty-five years ago.

The old original house wherein most of the family were born, an example of another type of architecture remained standing and formed part of the Powder Point School until it burned in 1886. It was rebuilt in as nearly a replica of the old building as possible.

"The lapse of years is marked no more significantly by the lessening numbers of ships' captains than by the decadence in Duxbury of her chief industry. Various were the causes which led to this decline: the shoal water of the harbor, running out dry at low tide, which became a more serious consideration with the steadily increasing size of vessels; the growing scarcity of ship timber in the vicinity; the growth of the business in East Boston, which gradually supplanted not only Duxbury but Medford; these and perhaps others combined, led to the abandonment of the yards by the proprietors. Quite a little colony of the skilled workmen removed to East Boston which still carries many Duxbury names on its roll of citizens.

A stranger visiting the sites of those busy shipyards would find absolutely nothing to indicate that any vessel was ever built there; all is stillness, and we who remember the town in its prosperous days, when Duxbury ships were known the world over have lived to see the time when a Duxbury skipper must go to the eastward of Cape Ann to have a twenty ton fishing schooner built!" (Unquote) Captain Bradford then quotes from another Duxburite of the late nineteenth century, George B. Loring, whose words show the resentment felt by the builders of the old sailing vessels for the new-fangled steamboats with machinery in their innards. Here is how Loring puts it: (Quote)

"To my youthful ear the sound of a hundred hammers in the early morning hours, when a day's labor began at sunrise and ended with the summer's sunset, was a music which I can never forget and which we shall probably never hear again. A Duxbury ship was to me a barge of beauty, and whatever achievements may be made in naval architecture, the names of Sampson and Weston and Drew and Frazer and Loring and Winsor will outshine, in my mind, all the McKays and Curriers, and Halls that ever launched a ship on the Merrimac or the Mystic, or on the shores of Noddles' Island, and will share with John Roach the fame of those American ship-builders whose vessels defied the storms of ocean and resisted the destructive took to time. But the music of those hammers is still' in the old shipyards in which I used to play, there is not a chip, or timber or spar or plank; instead there is a luxuriant greensward where grass is growing for cattle, and herb for the service of man." (unquote)

There have been three notable occasions of recent years recalling quiet Duxbury to the attention of the outside world, Mr. Bradford remarks at the close of his reminiscences. These were the landing in Duxbury of the French Atlantic cable in 1869, the laying of the

Standish Monument in 1872 and the celebration in 1887 of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the town. In honor of these events, he observes, her scattered children hastened home as to a Thanksgiving feast, held glad reunion, and spoke warm words of loving appreciation.

The greatest reunion of them all is to be held on July 3rd, 4th, and 5th - a jubilee in honor of Duxbury's three hundredth birthday. Next week the Tercentenary Committee will provide another story of the old days in historic Duxbury.